The Last Heir of Graham Hall

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The Last Heir of Graham Hall

by orphan_account

Summary

Hannibal is a famous doctor summoned by a sickly nobleman suffering from strange visions, sleepwalking and seizures. Will is antisocial except with dogs, lives in a decaying ancestral manor house by the sea, takes long solitary walks along the dramatic cliffs of the coastline to brood about the murder he is keeping secret. You can decide if Dr. Lecter is some kind of Faustian alchemist, vampire, demon, nightmare delusion, ghost, cannibal organ harvester, or just a creepy man being inappropriate with his favorite patient.

(Victorian Gothic Horror AU)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Will awoke in the middle of the night, his brow drenched in sweat, his heart beating furiously in his chest. If he focused he could almost still see the faint silhouette of a spectral image standing at the foot of the bed, as though it had been there all night, silently watching him sleep. It wove his nightmares with the same patience and care as with which his unmarried aunt Margo solemnly worked upon her embroidery by the fireplace.

The fire in the hearth had gone out, Will observed, leaving the room so cold that his breath would be visible when he exhaled a heavy sigh, rubbing his temple, still uncertain if that was the seat of his horrors -- or if it they had agency beyond his decaying consciousness.

He wondered if he had cried out -- if he did, no one had come. This was a relief, for then there was no need to explain nor apologize -- the old household servants had long ago grown used to their master's nightmares and peculiarities, and those who could not habituate themselves had given notice, often within the first week.

The situation was remote, the landscape bleak and inhospitable; the surrounding signs of civilization, if such they could be called, offered few diversions except for the ale house and the occasional walk along the cliffs on the days when it did not rain. When it was nearly impossible to go out -- which in certain seasons was often enough to become oppressive to the temperament of the master of the house and his dogs -- Will would pass the time going through his uncle's library, rarely finding the peace of mind to sit down, but rather, reading the titles and feeling the bindings, as if imagining the day when he would be well again, sitting down and believing himself to be at peace to follow the fine letters of ink to their conclusion.

Will would look through the collection of engravings, sorting and categorizing them under one system and then another, finding a pleasure in the occupation of bringing order to select fragments of his existence, while entirely neglecting others. His fishing hooks, his nightshirts, and his father's collection of holy relics were among those objects which fell under Will's oversight.

The late Lord Graham had a taste for religion, although few would call him a devout man.

He loved the way in which the divine elevated brutality to an art, giving it a tantalizing dramatic flair which would be vulgar in any other context. There was something crude in attending a hanging, but to behold a sacrifice – that was something else entirely, the man had once said, holding up a ceremonial knife believed to have its origin's with the ancient Aztecs, seating Will upon his lap.

The amount of imagination that goes into conniving the various forms of torture that go into populating Hell's landscapes piqued him greatly, Will remembered him saying many a time, carefully turning the pages of collected sketches by Hieronymus Bosch around Christmas, as if it were a very fine sort of children's picture book to be brought out on special occasions.

Titian's 'Punishment of Marsyas', hung above his father's bed during the long convalescence, making his body appear even smaller by comparison. Will remembered looking at the painting instead of at his father when as a child his governess would bring him in; it had a

strange festive air about it, similar to depictions of weddings -- with everyone crowding about, making preparations, and playing music. There was even a small dog, lapping up the blood as though it were a tasty morsel which had fallen from the bridegroom's table.

When he imagined his father, he would associate him with the smell of tobacco, a tall man with a dark beard, sitting in bed with a book in his lap, no longer the philandering adventurer he once was when he returned from his long tour of Europe, bitter and disillusioned. He had left the management of the estate to his younger brother, Hobbs, a business which he took to rather poorly. It was the lack of funds and the onset of gout, as much as the death of Lady Graham which had brought his father back to Graham Hall.

The reunion was a source of great vexation to both sire and son, but one that did not last long.

Lord Graham was soon to leave for the hereafter, refusing the last sacrament, and leaving Will with the suggestion that he should brush his hair, proceeding to cough up a great deal of blood and thereby putting an end to what would have been an uncomfortable encounter.

Will's governess, Ms. Hawkly, hurried him out to wipe away the bloodstains from his white collar, more in anxiety than out of any definite hope of succeeding at her task. Soon young William was seated in a low chair while Ms.Hawkly painfully pulled a comb through his wayward curls. He remembered feeling very angry to be locked away while countless people were heard coming and going.

There was a flurry of activity going near the sickroom down the hall and, as usual, he had already played his very small role in it, probably very badly.

The funeral took place on the same day as when the family greyhound, Biscuit had been run over by the solicitor's carriage. It was the proper thing, Will felt, to cry when his father's body was laid in the ground, timing it just after he had thrown his handful of dirt upon the coffin lid with a too-loud thud.

Will thought of Biscuit and the young doe which was dragged in by the gamekeeper a few nights prior, pleased with himself that for once he had managed to do what was expected of him.

When Ms.Hawkly took him back to his chamber for tea, he thought only about how good it would be, for things to go back to how they had been before his father's return. But time rarely reversed itself, even in a backwards sort of place as Langmoor, so he was told.

Some of the guests remained for the following day, some staying the entire week in anticipation of the reading of the will. However, many hopeful cousins and widows were disappointed in their expectations, for the Grahams had little enough to pay off their debts, let alone to make a show of generosity without reaping its fruits. Will would of course inherit the house once he came of age, Crawford pronounced, as well as a certain sum left behind after litigation among his father's many creditors. A Dr.Hannibal Lecter was named as Will's guardian until he came of age, a figure who Will had come to think of as a wraith of calamity, always appearing before a death in the family.

In the case of both his mother and his father's illness, Lecter was summoned a day or two prior to the fateful event. Despite the haste with which he arrived from London, sparing no expense to expedite his journey, the patient would be found already cold. He had only to collect his fee, which he declined out of politeness. Being an independently wealthy man, it was possible for him to be polite in this and other ways which were simply beyond the pale for the local butcher, who fed the family vultures their scraps at an exorbitant fee, or so Ms.Hawkley attested.

Will ate the scraps with relish, rarely having the opportunity to taste red meats due to the cook's economy and Ms.Hawkley's avid support for the health benefits of a legume-based diet.

Even as a boy, Will remembered Dr.Lecter's sharp features and imposing stature, the elegance of his dress and the languid way in which he smiled while his eyes seemed to dissect you. Will had always felt uncomfortable with eyes, but Dr.Lecter's in particular had a singular quality about them. The doctor did not see him as a child, as other adults did, but spoke to him as though he were an equal, asking him questions on ethics and mortality such as he would ponder during many a sleepless hour, until the time came when he would see the good doctor again -- no longer a boy but a man standing on the knife-edge of madness.

They had played chess together on the evening after the burial -- Will must have fallen asleep, not remembering who had carried him to his bed. Dr.Lecter had to depart early the next morning and did not come back, not for several years, so that his countenance took on the semblance of a strange dream.

Will would imagine it as the face of Mephistopheles when he first read Geothe's Faust, flashing his smile in the moonlight of Walpurgis Night.

It was to Dr.Lecter that Will attributed his awakening, remembering the wet dream and its consequences for the rest of his life – how Ms.Hawkly was scolding him to get out of bed, saying that they were already late for church, how groggy and dazed he had felt when she pulled back the covers and discovered the mess he had made. He remembered the punishment received, his hands bruised and bleeding from the birch rod, as if he had done it on purpose, which he ought to have done had he known better.

They did not go to church that morning on the excuse that Will was sick, which in a certain light Ms.Hawkly believed to be true, appalled that such a thing could take place the morning after his father's death, certain that that there was something morbid in the boy's preciousness. She sent Will's bed-linen and clothing downstairs to be washed, neither speaking again of what had taken place. Naturally enough, Will learned about his body and the need for discretion.

That was not the last night when Lecter visited Will's thoughts and dreams. The man's infrequent visits provided sufficient stimulus for the young man's imagination -- perhaps it was on account of this that Dr.Lecter took on an almost idolatrous supernatural presence in Will's mind, appearing in his life at the most formative cross-roads of change and upheaval with an impressive aura of calm authority, so that even such men as were superior to him in rank and fortune seemed overshadowed in his presence. These high praises seemed ridiculous and exaggerated to Will as he grew older, but no less appealing as the substance for self-

comforting delusion. It was on a subconscious level that Will had chosen to keep himself a virgin, cultivating an almost prudish disgust towards any opportunity which may come his way, preserving his initiation into the mystery of love for the 'other' alone. By the time Will had reached the mature age of five and thirty, these notions, unknown to any but him, had been the cause of much vexation for several dowagers and their eligible young ladies, as well as Ms.Hawkly, who never ceased to think of Will's good.

A certain mystery surrounded what Will had gleaned of Dr.Lecter's history and upbringing, mere fragments which burned with a dark fire of possibility.

Lecter had been disinherited by his family after a trip to Italy and had been forced to make his own way in the world, not without help from various benefactors in the medical profession. He worked passionately under the tutelage of a mediocre surgeon, whose reputation had since been swathed in controversy, bringing him out of relative obscurity. Lecter and his master, Dr.Norris Browkel had successfully published several well-regarded books on anatomy before their work was put to an end by the imprisonment of the latter.

According to newspapers, Browkel fell under criticism for the means by which he procured the material for his research, having dealings with body snatchers and corrupting his students. Causing a great stir, the tide of publicity which carried the Browkel name also brought out that of his student, Dr.Lecter, elevating his career and enabling him to set up his own practice in London. While remaining unorthodox in his methods, it is uncertain whether he continued along the path of Browkel's line of enquiry – who had been heavily criticized by even the most free-thinking of his peers as venturing too far into the mystical and esoteric to be taken seriously as a man of science.

As for Dr.Lecter, the success rate of the surgeries which he performed was a matter beyond dispute, allowing him to gradually earn back the respect of those who had once mocked and ridiculed him and his master as mere charlatans.

Lecter accepted with good grace any allusion to having sold his soul to the Devil to get his career back and escape the noose, long after the joke had lost its novelty.

It was with difficulty that Will had been able to procure these banned works of Browkel and Lecter, finding himself poorly compensated for the risk and expense – far from satisfying his curiosity on the topic of necromancy and the transmutation of the soul.

Except for the engravings, which he copied in the blank pages of his old Latin grammar book, Will found the writing obtuse and unintelligible, full of jargon and lacking any sense of narrative which might appeal to his romantic vision of Dr.Lecter. Nevertheless, he treasured these curios as something which tied him to the existence of the 'other', incorrectly attributing the primary authorship of the papers more to Lecter than to Browkel.

Will would revisit these papers again in adulthood, finding his opinion largely unchanged – in alignment to those outside of the niche of academia which Browkel occupied for a decade or so before falling back into obscurity, joined a few decades after by his pupil -- whose blood-stained name Will devoted himself to obliterating in the decline of his years.

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There was a general consensus among those involved in looking after Will's interests and their own, that the young master need not concern himself with this, that and the other – his realm of focus should be towards his studies and those pass-times which suited the son of a gentleman.

As far as Will was made aware, the investments made with his fortune prospered under the management of Hobbs and Dr.Lecter – the latter having settled the feud between the late Lord Graham and his uncle by giving him a long-disputed share in the fortune and permitting him to oversee the heir's education.

Will recalled Dr.Lecter's visits from London as a time of great activity, when men from near and far would crowd into his father's office, their gregarious talk reaching his own chamber upstairs. If he put his eye to a hole in one of the floorboards he could even see the top of Mr.Thompson's balding head, the secretary summoned to take notes for the meeting.

It was with great difficult that Lecter managed to subdue this motley group of bankers, land owners, and others who hoped to carry their grievances against the dead onto the living Lord Graham. It was a great misfortune, said Uncle Hobbs, that their reach did not extend beyond the grave or they would have gone so far as to warn old Lucifer of the man's wiles and deceptions, or anyone else who would listen. Unlike Lucifer, Dr.Lecter had little time to spare for the wickedness of his fellow man, adhering whenever possible to the subjects of the formal agenda.

Will found it endlessly fascinating to hear them curse one another as an addle pate gib-faced back biter, among the milder retorts, only to see the most querulous among them leave the billiard room sharing a glass of whisky, leaning on each other like brothers, making their way to their respective carriages in jovial swaying steps – having put away their daggers until the next fiscal quarter.

It was almost always the same ritual, taking place at least once each season. First, Lecter would have his tea upstairs, then he would play King Solomon, then the guests would drink and feast, followed by more drinking and cards – a time when most of the final negotiations were concluded by those who remained more or less sober.

Only after the last of them departed could Dr.Lecter retire from the day's work, taking a long bath before lying down in his bed, leaving early the following morning.

It was only at Lecter's arrival and departure that Chilton would bring Will forward, dressed in his best suit, to utter the words which they had previously rehearsed, quoting Homer and Aristotle on suitable themes such as gratitude, discipline, and virtue.

It was believed that Lecter was particularly fond of the ancient Greeks, allowing himself to be delayed by the curious tableaus which Will and some of the servants would blushingly present before him, dressed in togas sewn by aunt Margo.

Will was bashful to be cast in the leading roles, sometimes finding himself dumbstruck when ushered onto the improvised stage, so that Chilton would have to provide him his lines in a whisper that sounded like a hiss. Will could only enjoy these moments in retrospect, being able to look upon Dr.Lecter's beguiling smile, showing him his bare limbs, hoping that art

and nature had combined to form something which would endear him to the man's refined tastes.

Whether or not he was successful, Will was never entirely certain – it was enough for him to be seen by Dr.Lecter, and by being seen, to exist -- for it often seemed to him as though his life went on like a monotonous dream, where each day repeated itself within the limited confines of Graham Hall. The house was haunted by a heavy fog which had the effect of dulling the minds and exaggerating the worst traits in each of its inhabitants by leaving them to fester in isolation like untreated wounds.

Will was grateful to Dr.Lecter for the pleasure of his existence, the man for whom the play of gods and heroes went on and on, year after year until master Graham came of age and Margo's eyesight grew too feeble to sew, hoping that by then Will would gain enough strength to pierce through the cobwebs – freeing himself from Graham Hall, Chilton, Hobbs, Ms.Hawkley and the rest.

But there were some things which he could never surrender. Fixed within his mind was the night when he had laid eyes upon a body shaped along classical lines of masculine beauty, following the arch of his back and the breadth of his shoulders, beholding the deep scars lacerating the skin, drawing Wills gaze to the tendons of his arms and the finely shaped ankles marked by burns as he stepped into the bathtub. Will had waited until the maid, Mariam had departed, taking his place by the door, opening it like a thief, imagining that Psyche's heart had beat in the same way when she approached her lover in the darkness.

"William!" it was Ms.Hawkely who grabbed him by the arm, a grip which was almost painful as she pulled him away from the sliver of light to which he pressed his eye. Lecter's head had been resting on a towel folded over the edge of the bathtub, his arms draped on its sides, exhausted from the day's negotiations. He turned and for a moment their eyes had met – the same intoxicating smile which seemed to exist for Will alone, providing a feast for his fantasies on many a night when Will would lock his door and imagine the impossible.

He felt sick to his stomach to think that he had lived upon these visits, each like a spark of light floating in a jar, something stolen from a realm which did not belong to him, that perhaps never would. One feels it in his bones, Will remembered his father saying – the difference between killing for man and killing for god, it is a delicate nuance, but an important one – you feel it to the very depths of your being, just as old Abraham had felt it, is it not so dear boy?

With Dr.Lecter, that difference did not exist.

To kill him, to kill for him, to be killed by him – it would all be nothing less than divine.

Through the foil of death, Will realized the intensity of the mirror image in the sphere of life. The years passed slowly and he wondered if he would ever become a man. It was a strange thing to think of, that one morning he would wake up and suddenly everything would change, he would legally be of age and his own master, he would control the estate and his father's fortune, all falling under his sway. He would be ready when Crawford came to take his signature yet his hand would still tremble -- not with doubt but with excitement to exercise his righteous power and cast out the demons which had caged him.

Not long after his father's death Hobbs established himself as the master of the house, in addition to the various tutors who were sent to the manor, coming and going with an alarming frequency until the tenacious Frederick Chilton was finally found to be 'suitable'. This is not to say that Chilton succeeded in conquering the unruly spirit of his pupil, who was to be found among the stray dogs and urchins of the village -- covered in mud and scratches -- as often as at his writing desk.

Chilton's young ward remained obstinate in his desire to preserve his solitude and salvage the remnants of control over the increasingly stifling schedule of the day, full of Latin, mathematics, history, piano, archery – most of which he might more or less tolerate were it not for the condescending manner of his teacher and the difficulty he found in sitting still for hours on end under Chilton's watchful eye.

He was spoiled and feral -- a clever brat; this was as far as Chilton went in the way of praise.

It was only after much quarrelling that Will was obliged to bend to the older man's influence.

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Will had long since crossed this age of innocence and the manor house itself seemed to mourn its passing. Entire floors of Graham Hall were sealed off and left to the ravages of time, fine furniture and draperies falling victim to this neglect, objects left in their place as though ladies and gentlemen had one day vanished like exorcised ghosts, leaving behind their sacred talismans; combs, necklaces of pearl, half-filled cigar cases, and crystal glasses.

When Will felt lonesome he would enter these rooms, breathing in the musty scent of decay and examining what seemed to him a fine tableau. He felt like someone who had arrived too late to the theatre, finding the play already over, and yet he would sit down and look at the empty stage, imagining what might have been.

Lord Graham's needs were few, being a solitary bachelor who preferred the company of hounds and the sea to that of his fellow man. Occasionally he would talk to the fishermen who came from the nearby village, helping them pull in their catch and tie their boats at the docks.

Sometimes he would spend days on end working on repairs, dressed in the guise of a common laborer, correcting anyone who might call him by his name or title, as if it were an insult cast upon him.

Many thought that he had gone mad since the death of Uncle Hobbs, an incident which had stirred much talk, reaching far beyond the gray skies which so often cast their shadows over the coast not far from Graham Hall.

It as a fine old house which had fallen into disrepair by the negligence of its master -- he was to be the last of his family line, a rumor which Will himself had instigated in the resolve that no other should occupy the ancestral seat after his body was cast to the waves.

Graham had enjoyed sailing since he was a boy, the family steward had once said, but after the disappearance of Hobbs he could not bring himself to do more than walk along the beach.

Some had seen him walking at night, barefoot and wearing little more than his nightgown, attributing this strange behaviour to bouts of sleepwalking.

Those who found him, shivering and muttering incoherently in a tongue which seemed hardly human, would face a great struggle attempting to bring him back to the house, an effort which the steward made sure to reward generously.

Gradually most of the acquaintances Graham had kept up among the nobility had fallen away, once maintained out of a sense of social obligation and mutual interest, rather than any warmth of feeling. Among the few who remained faithful to Graham included the family solicitor, Jack Crawford, whose sense of duty and strength of character prevented him from being swayed by the scandal which surrounded itself with the name of Graham, certain that his client's notoriety was built upon a foundation of slander.

After all, no body was ever found, no evidence discovered except in the unfortunate manner in which Lord Graham chose to grieve the loss of a man who had been like a father to him.

Crawford believed in Will's sanity and this made Will uncomfortable -- as much as disbelief stirred his anger, to be pronounced sane was a burdensome thing which he likewise felt unprepared to endure.

Unlike people, it is a great comfort that dogs do not seem to care one way or another.

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Will removed his nightshirt and went to the washbasin, splashing cold water on his face, feeling goosebumps along his skin.

Putting on a change of clothing, he tried to fall asleep but found his thoughts were not of the kind which promised rest. He thought of Dr.Lecter, a figure who had receded into the distance, an idea of a man, rather than a man -- having faced the ravages of time in the way that King Arthur and Odin do as boys grow up. Without fully losing their power to be intriguing, their allure is diminished. Other cares suffocate their mystery and mysticism, which one fears, like other false hopes held in childhood, must also be an illusion.

It is only in a time of dire need and self-abasing desperation that a middle-aged man calls upon such idols -- when the gods of respectable people have proven themselves to be a disappointingly indifferent audience, as respectable people themselves often are -- offering a sympathic ear and little help, while being too polite, too cowardly, or too busy to smite down the sufferer as in times of old.

Lord Graham searched among the rubbish in his writing desk for paper and ink, scrawling the words *'Dear Dr.Hannibal Lecter'* eighteen times before arriving at a letter which he could compel himself to send with the morning post.

End Notes

The art which inspired this story: https://hannigram-house.tumblr.com/post/671552170449092608/hannibal-is-a-famous-doctor-summoned-by-a-sickly

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